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ABSTRACT

For a long time now, the government provision of nursery schools has been completely relegated to the background in the Nigerian educational system. It was not until the evolution of the National Policy on Education in 1977 that nursery education was recognized as a worthwhile introduction to the nation's educational system. Prior to this development, nursery schools were regarded by the general populace as bourgeois facilities meant for the children of the educated elite and political leadership. The rationale for this conception can be considered from both the economic standpoint and with respect to the complete lack of direction and policy evident within the government. As a result, the provision of nursery schools and day care centers became almost exclusively the preserve of individual entrepreneurs who saw the prevailing condition as an opportunity to amass wealth from the working class and the helpless urban population. It was within such a climate of affairs that Nigerian universities pioneered the provision of nursery schools alongside staff primary schools, as a service and not a business concern. (Author)

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A CASE ANALYSIS OF THE PROVISION OF PRE-PRIMARY EDUCATIONAL FACILITIES IN NIGERIA

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A Case Analysis of the Provision of Pre-Primary Educational Facilities in Nigeria

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Abstract

For a long time now, the provision of nursery schools by government has been completely relegated to the back-ground in the Nigerian educational system. It was not until the evolvement of the National Policy on Education in 1977 that nursery education was recognised as a worthwhile introduction to the nation's educational system. Prior to this development, nursery schools were regarded by the generality of the populace as bourgeois facilities meant for the children of the educated elite and the political leadership.

The rationale for this conceptualisation can be considered from both the economic stand-point and the attitude of government or lack or policy for the provision of this essential facility due to a complete lack of direction. As a result, the provision of nursery schools and day-care centres became almost exclusively the preserve of individual entrepreneurs who saw the prevailing condition as an opportunity to amass wealth from the working class and the helpless urban population. It was under such climate of affairs that Nigerian Universities pioneered the provision of nursery schools alongside staff primary schools, as a service and not a business concern.

Introduction

The involvement of Nigerian Universities in the provision of nursery schools became necessary in order to arrest the spirit of exploitation paramount amongst proprietors, while at the same time offering a service to children of employed staff. In furtherance of the latter objective, universities therefore pioneered the establishment of nursery schools along western lines as a means to cater for the children of staff who are compelled to work in places far away from cities and towns. The plight of staff members became worsened by the fact that Nigerian universities are remotely located in order to create the so-called environment for teaching, research and dissemination of information and knowledge whereas these tasks are equally well delivered by city universities in Europe, in the United States and Canada. Increasingly these days, of course, because of the surge for greater community involvement and interaction in university activities, university-based nursery schools have also thrown their doors open to children of non-university workers to serve as models and means of promoting good community relationship. However, this opportunity is utilised mainly by the rich because they are able to afford the daily shuttles over the long distances to and from exclusive, remote university precincts to avail their children the opportunity of nursery education.

Although a few states in the country have started to set up some day care centres and pre-primary educational facilities in major cities and towns, the lukeward attitude of government functionaries to the education and care of children of pre-school age has not left much to be desired. In view of this, this paper analyses government policy on provision, the universities' attempts to rectify the skeletal initiative; and through

this, a program of full integration of nursery facilities into the conventional educational system is advocated for the benefit of the citizenry.

National Policy

In Nigeria, nursery education or pre-primary education is the education provided in institutions to children aged 3 to 5-plus, prior to entry to primary school. As espoused in the National Policy on Education (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1977, p. 6), nursery school is essentially meant to cater for the following needs:

(i) preparation for the primary school by ensuring a smooth transition from home to school;

(ii) providing a forum for adequate care of children while their parents are engaged on the farms, in the markets and offices, etc.;

(iii) avenue for inculcating social norms, cooperation, team spirit and the formation of good habits;

(iv) developing in children the rudiments of numbers, letters through play, and the inculcation of the spirit of enquiry and creativity through exploration of the environment.

To achieve these objectives, government policy is centred on (a) encouragement of private efforts for the provision of pre-primary education; (b) training of teachers for pre-primary education; (c) ensuring that the medium of instruction in pre-primary educational facilities is the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment of the school; and finally, (d) legislating for the regulation and control of nursery schools.

A careful appraisal of the above strategies of goal achievement shows that only the first step has been vigorously pursued. This did not result from any practical form of encouragement of private proprietors by government, rather it was as a result of the sudden awareness amongst individual proprietors of the opportunity to thoroughly exploit the cradle of an education system for handsome profits. This is coupled by the growing awareness amongst parents (the clients) of the need to provide their children a sound foundation in order to succeed in primary school. To satisfy this need, parents turn to no other source than the private proprietor for public facilities are almost non-existent since nursery schools in most States fall within the category of institutions excepted from government ownership (Bendel State Government, 1972 section 20, paragraph 4a). However, an exception to this provision is the Rivers State where the State government or its functionaries actually own and operate some nursery facilities (Rivers State Government, 1980).

Since the demand for places is overwhelming, selection is based on the ability of parents to pay the unregulated fee which ranges from seventy naira (about $100) to two hundred naira (approximately $285) for a three-month term.

The second strategy has become unattainable because government emphasis is focused mainly on the training of teachers for the regular school system, that is, the first through third levels of education. Even this preoccupation has not been satisfactorily handled since more than 50 per cent of teachers in primary and secondary schools are still unqualified, yet they have been retained in the system to keep it going (Bendel State of Nigeria, 1979). Furthermore, no training provision has actually been

made for nursery teachers for efforts in all the training college at the secondary level are geared towards the preparation of teachers for the primary school in order to make a success of the universal primary education (UPE) scheme which was launched in Nigeria in 1976 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1975). In the case of universities, emphasis is on the preparation of graduate teachers for the requirements of secondary schools, especially the demands of the new 6-3-3-4 system of education. However, in some instances as at Ibadan University and Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, diploma and degree courses are available for the training of nursery school teachers. According to the prospectus of the Faculty of Education (University of Ibadan, 1975), the degree program for nursery teachers is centred on courses in nursery and primary education, with provision for further work and specialisation at graduate level in the department and institute of education.

Equally disappointing on the part of government is the inability to ensure the implementation of the third provision which stipulates the use of the mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment as the medium of instruction in nursery schools. As opposed to official policy, nursery schools in Nigeria are the centres of language alienation where the local language is eliminated through the substitution of English and its related culture. As a result children leave the nursery school for primary schools, displaying an abundance of western patterns and tradition to the extent that we would be tempted to conclude that the de-facto object of pre-primary education in Nigeria is acculturation rather than enculturation. The consequence is that products of nursery schools in Nigeria are generally daft and ignorant of the essential parameters and norms of

African or local culture for which the African child should be identified. This is a glaring example where actual practice is a direct antithesis of legal provision in Nigerian education. It is necessary to realise that this form of violation of statutory provision is even against the interest of the pupils themselves for, on leaving nursery schools, they are expected to do the lower classes of the primary school in their mother tongue or the language of the immediate environment (Federal Republic of Nigeria op cit Section 3 para. 15). Perhaps this situation has persisted without official reaction because of an equally damaging violation in the primary school where English has become the actual medium of instruction throughout the six-year course, as against legal requirements.

Finally, on the question of overall control and regulation, government agencies have also not measured up to expectation because of lack of a suitable machinery to carry out this function. The ministries of education lack experts in the field of nursery education hence planning, administration and control of nursery facilities cannot be effectively coordinated. As a result, schools have much-roomed to the extent that state governments hardly know the actual numbers of nursery schools within their respective areas of jurisdiction. Many therefore operate illegally in homes, garages and in temporary sheds without any form of guarantee for the provision of facilities crucial for recreation, play and music - the three principal media through which children are expected to grasp the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes and forms in nursery schools.

It is against this haphazard background that we examine the role of the universities, the armed forces and a few other government agencies in provision of nursery schools in Nigeria.

The University Initiative

Today, a Nigerian university is hardly complete without a staff school/nursery school to cater for the children of staff. This situation developed because of the need to satisfy the following objectives, namely:

(i) to provide a centre within the campus for staff children while their parents are on duty;

(ii) to develop centres within university precincts with exclusive or near exclusive facilities as services to overcome the remoteness of institutions, thereby giving Nigerian universities the satirical name of "ivory towers";

(iii) to provide a demonstration or model centre for the profit-minded proprietors to emulate in terms of facilities, curriculum standards and level of staffing;

(iv) to guarantee good (western) education for children of staff through some form of organised introductory forum.

The pioneer in this endeavour of pre-school care and education was the University of Ibadan which founded its staff school/nursery school for the actualisation of these goals. To ensure the realisation of the fourth goal, a secondary school, to which products of the nursery-cum-staff school could transfer, was also established. This has since become a pattern for all Nigerian universities.

In the University of Port Harcourt, facilities for pre-primary education are operated as an integral part of the University Demonstration Primary School (UDPS). Altogether, about one hundred children are admitted every year into the nursery facility while an added advantage of the Port Harcourt system is that the products of the nursery school are given automatic

admission to the primary wing of the UDPS, which is run as a private, (though non-profit-making) model institution with adequate staffing, physical facilities and regular supervision by the Faculty of Education of the university.

Present policy on admission shows that ninety-seven per cent of intakes into the nursery school must be children, relatives or dependants of staff while the other three per cent is reserved for outsiders, that is, children from the locality. This is meant as one of the ways of promoting good relationship between the university and the immediate community.

In terms of charges, university-based nursery schools are cheaper than those operated by individual proprietors. In the University of Port Harcourt, for instance, charges are only made towards children's refreshment while costs of books, toys, outdoor recreational facilities and teachers are borne by the university.

Attempts By Government Agencies

Closely related to university efforts is the attempt made by the armed forces and some government-owned agencies. The armed forces, especially the army and air force operate nursery schools alongside their respective primary schools. The same thing is true of some public corporations and companies such as the Delta Steel Company in Bendel State and the Pabod Finance Company in the Rivers State. The main rationale for schools being run by the armed forces has been the need to easily take care of transfers of parents in the military service and at the same time be able to secure places for their children with minimum disruption - a case which is not easy to handle if servicemen are limited to civil schools.

Apart from service to members of the armed forces a considerable number of children of civilian parents also attend these schools and this has contributed in no small measure to the promotion of the image of the armed forces. Undoubtedly this is a service the public relations department of the armed forces must be very proud of.

Conclusion

As has been highlighted by the provision of the National Policy on Education, the running and ownership of nursery schools will continue to be left exclusively in the hands of private proprietors since the system of pre-primary education in Nigeria lies outside the statutory system of education. This is a grave limitation on the part of government. Even if adequate nursery schools with the required staff and sophisticated facilities cannot be provided now, both Federal and State governments, as a first step to rectify the present exploitative situation, need to provide day-care units/nursery class alongside primary schools. These would cater for children aged between three and five who now go to primary schools illegally with their elder brothers and sisters, especially in the rural areas, while their parents are engaged in their respective occupations or daily chores of life.

There is also the need to emphasize language education at all levels of our education to enable adequate development of othography in local languages to facilitate their utilization as media of instruction in primary schools, while English is studied as a subject. By so doing nursery schools will inevitably operate through local languages and restore to children their cultural heritage which they are increasingly being alienated from as a result of two much emphasis on English and its values.

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